

CAREER OF DON PIO PICO.

THE LAST MEXICAN GOVERNOR OF CALIFORNIA.

HIS EARLY POLITICAL LIFE VARIED BY FREQUENT INSURRECTION AND HIS LATER YEARS BY LITIGATION—NOW NINETY.

ONE YEAR OLD—A MOVEMENT TO RAISE A FUND FOR HIM.

Los Angeles, March 21.—The proneness of the American people to hero worship, or rather to indiscriminate hero-worship, sometimes results in the placing of the ridiculous on a pedestal. Such appears to be the result of the movement recently started in Southern California to raise a fund for ex-Governor Pio Pico. This old gentleman—he is now ninety-one—has a curious record, but not one which entitles him to pose as a great man or as a present worthy one. He is unique in being the sole survivor of the bureaucracy of Mexican California. Of all the gobernadores, viceroys, alcaldes, comandantes and the like of the past age of this State he alone remains.

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With all respect for his years and the honors he has achieved, it is not doing Don Pico any injustice to say that he has lived a crafty life, that his last official acts were so indiscreet as to border on the unscrupulous, and that he cordially hated the Americans as long as it was safe for him to indulge in that fancy.

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"We find ourselves threatened by herds of Yankee immigrants," he said, "who have already begun to flock into our country, and whose progress we cannot arrest. Already have the wagons of that perditional people scaled the almost inaccessible summits of the Sierra Nevada, crossed the entire continent, and penetrated the fruitful valley of the Sacramento. What that astonishing people will next undertake I cannot say, but in whatever enterprise they embark they will surely be successful. Already these adventurous voyagers are spreading themselves far and wide over a country which seems to suit their tastes, are cultivating farms, establishing vineyards, erecting sawmills, sawing lumber and doing a thousand things which seem attitudinal to them."

Pico wanted to seek refuge under the Union Jack, and turn the country over to England. General Vallejo answered this speech by a ringing declaration that he would not allow the country to be taken by the Yankees, and he would defend it with his own hands.

Governor Pico, since the purchase of California, has lived quietly, but not at peace, for he has been a persistent litigant. The recent agitation spoken of above to raise funds for the old man was started by the decision of the State Supreme Court in the case of Pico against Cohn, which was against the plaintiff, and which, it was supposed, deprived him of the last of his real property. However, his lawyers have succeeded in securing a rehearing, and again he is in the courts for winning. The case involves the title to the Pico house, which visitors to Los Angeles of twelve or fifteen years ago will remember as a hotel, and among other property, probably worth now \$500,000. When the decision of the court was published, some sentimentalists immediately attempted to awaken public sympathy for the old man, on the plea that he was a pauper, but the fact is that his nephews, Don Marco and Don Juan Forster, of San Juan Capistrano, make him a liberal monthly allowance, and care for him in many ways, though in the course of his litigious career the old Governor tried his best to dispossess his nephews of their estates.

With all respect for his years and the honors he has achieved, it is not doing Don Pico any injustice to say that he has lived a crafty life, that his last official acts were so indiscreet as to border on the unscrupulous, and that he cordially hated the Americans as long as it was safe for him to indulge in that fancy.

His career is of considerable interest. I have lately investigated it, and through the assistance of B. A. Cecil Stevens, the secretary of the Southern California Historical Society, I have obtained some facts not heretofore generally known.

He came into the world on May 5, 1801. His father was a presidial sergeant at the Mission of San Gabriel, where Pico made his appearance. The old church at San Geronimo, which so many tourists gaze at as an antiquity, was only completed when Pico was three years old; and as soon as he was old enough, he served in it as an acolyte until he was twelve years old, when he went to San Diego to attend a school there. He remained a student until he was eighteen, but the only notable incident recorded about him in that time is the statement that at sixteen he won twelve miles at a game of monte from Father Antonio Mendez, the priest at San Diego, and was ever after regarded as an accomplished gambler.

Another incident occurred worthy of note. After he left school he opened a store at San Diego, and in 1828 began his political career by being elected senior vocal of the diputacion, a body somewhat corresponding to the American supervisors. This same year he did the American a good turn which should be set down to his credit. Henry Fitch was the first American in San Diego. He was a little young Yankee, and he found favor in the large black eyes of Senorita Josefa Carrillo, a niece of Don Pico. Governor Echandia, who had his headquarters at San Diego, was also enamored of Senorita Josefa, but the Yankee distasteful to the Governor, and the day for his wedding was set, after he had consented to become a son of the Church. So Josefa left Henry to his fate, and the crumbling walls of the church are always pointed out to the traveler as he passes Old Town on his way to San Diego. Padre Mendez, the same who lost the twelve miles to Pico on a poor hand at monte, had just begun the ceremony when a clatter of sabres and pit-pat of horses' hoofs were heard, and a detachment of the Governor's guard entered the church and on the part of Echandia forbade the conclusion of the rite. There was consternation, and Fitch was, in the parlance of the day, "knocked out."

"What shall I do?" he whispered to Josefa. "Why don't you carry me off, Don Enrique?" she coyly answered.

Don Pico, who seems to have always been opposed to the Government, came to the rescue of the unhappy lovers. There was a ship in the harbor about to clear for Chili. He arranged all the details, and in the details he rowed Fitch and Josefa with his own hands out to the ship and saw her safely stand out around Point Loma with her happy passengers. In a little while Mr. and Mrs. Fitch, with a lusty little son, sailed back into San Diego harbor, and the Yankee was at once arrested on a charge of having scandalized the Church. He was found guilty, and was sentenced to San Geronimo with a fifty-pound ball, which he never did.

The next heard of Don Pico was in 1830, when he appeared in Los Angeles and went into the saloon business. It has become a matter of tradition that in these days there was none or few glass drinking-vessels, and that Pico's bar was furnished with cups made of ox horns—the regular orthodox drinking horn. Tradition also has it that these horns of Pico's were furnished with false bottoms, which prevented them from holding much liquor. At any rate, the young politician, as has often been the case since, acquired both wealth and influence while engaged in dealing out pulque and mescal, for in the same year he presided over the diputacion, and it passed the law secularizing all the wealthy missions in the province, and their treasures were quickly lost sight of, for their property passed into the hands of the administration, and that was the end of all the money, corn, cattle and wine the hardworking padres and the harder working converts, the Indians, had accumulated.

The next year Governor Echandia was succeeded by Manuel Victoria, a negro half-breed, who at once refused to convoke the diputacion and determined to rule California all by himself. This led to a revolt, and Pico issued a manifesto, and after prolonged fighting, in which two soldiers were killed, Victoria surrendered on condition of being allowed to return to Mexico, and Pico as president of the diputacion, was entitled to act as Governor until an accredited one arrived from Mexico, and on January 10, 1832, he took the oath of office. But ex-Governor Echandia protested, and as the latter had a strong following, Don Pico prudently declined to hold the office.

From this time up to 1845 Don Pico spent his time more or less as a conspirator or as an official. There were a dozen or so governors, all of whom had troubled terms of office. The feud which even now exists broke out between the North and the South, and Monterey and Los Angeles were rivals in the contest for the location of the capital. At last the Southern broke away, and on February 14, 1845, an assembly called by Pico met and in a few days declared that wily Don Pico was the only legitimate Governor of California.

He immediately organized a force to withstand Governor Micheltorena. Both sides had the deadly American rifle, but these Gringos did not waste much powder. Pico had three small warlike pieces and Pico's force two, and these little machines were set to work before the two forces came into range, with the result that neither advanced further. Pico managed to make a conference with Micheltorena, and he was allowed to withdraw from the field. Sutter, who was with Micheltorena, followed him to the capture and the fight began again. The result was that four

horses, which did not know any better than to stray within range of the cannon, were killed, and Micheltorena surrendered on agreement that he should be permitted to return to Mexico, and on February 23 he sailed for the Gulf of California in the Guernaterra chair, proclaimed peace and made Los Angeles